

# **VOTSBORO:**

## **A Gothic YA Anthology**

# They Never Told Me

My parents always told me that my body would experience some changes in high school. They never told me about the temporary paralysis. When I first awoke on the deserted baseball diamond, my legs refused to cooperate with my spine. I spent an hour and a half clawing through yards and yards of dust and astroturf. My quivering arms demanded rest, but hunger prodded them into perseverance. Not only did I crave a meal—something rich and full-bodied to thicken my watery blood—I also craved answers.

My parents always told me not to talk to strangers. They never warned me about the silent ones. How could I have let him sneak up on me? What had happened to the cheering crowds? What was the final score of the game? Every few feet, I managed to grab a handful of memory. I saw a glimpse of the stranger emerging from behind the dugout. I relived the fiery prick of a needle to my abdomen. I remembered the moment when I had extracted the object from between my ribs, only to discover the mother of all syringes in my hand. The last drop of clear fluid from the needlepoint had embedded itself in the soil. My limp body had followed suit.

The flashbacks faded as I drew nearer to the school building. I found the back door ripped from its hinges, and I climbed across the threshold. The muscle fibers of my legs writhed beneath the surface. When sensation returned to my lower half, I found myself walking exclusively on tiptoes. The new gait just felt more natural.

My parents always told me that I would eventually need to provide for myself. They never mentioned anything about farm raiding. The school cafeteria's inventory only lasted for less than a month after the incident, leaving me with no other option. I descended upon a nearby ghost town.

Entire farms disappeared down my gullet. Willard Herschel's prized wheat field became a sacrifice to my appetite. Heads of lettuce dissolved in my mouth. My bite reduced corncocks to a moist pulp. Whole melons disintegrated between my jaws. I left no rind intact.

I eventually needed to expand my horizons when the food supply dried up. On one occasion, I managed to climb atop Powell Ridge and use Willard's binoculars to survey the landscape. (I plan to return them at *some* point.) In my search for untouched crops, I glimpsed one of my own kind among the

Fitzpatrick Ranch cattle. The thirtysomething woman buried her face in the flank of a freshly-slaughtered heifer, emerging with chunks of raw steak between her teeth.

She vanished before I could reach her location. I used matchsticks, a fireplace, and a skewer in the Fitzpatrick ranch house to craft beef kabobs from her leftovers. Beginning the next morning, I no longer bothered with fruits and vegetables. By the following week, I no longer bothered with a fire.

My parents always told me that I would bulk up with age. They would always remind me to keep pumping that iron and sipping on that chocolate milk. They never said that my bodyweight would increase by a full third during junior year. Millions of particles from the animals' meat clung to my bones, constructing bundles of taut cables underneath my skin. My silhouette inflated. Lumbering shoulders forced me to hunch. (Mother would *definitely* disapprove of my new posture.)

My parents always told me to stay well-groomed. They never warned me that a stranger's injection would make my appearance unmanageable. A scraggly carpet of brown and silver has overtaken most of my hide. It's too much of a pain to comb or brush. Now I only shower once or twice a week. I use the locker room showers at school, which became my new home when a band of armed marauders invaded my neighborhood a few days ago.

They never informed me that my fingernails would one day peel off in translucent strips. I spent half a week nail-less before ivory barbs sprouted from my fingertips in their place. Back in the fifth grade, my entire class had once envied Jacob Huff for his bear tooth necklace. (He claimed to have hunted the beast himself.) Now I possess a bear tooth at the end of each digit.

My parents always told me that people would call me names. They never told me that Tommy Buffett Junior would glower at me, hollering "Go back to Hell, ya filthy wolf-man!" while unloading his last shotgun shell into my torso. The ranch hand's shot had rung through the ballpark for a full minute.

Now I lie back at square one—back at home plate. My lupine legs no longer listen to me. Black spots dance in my vision. Tommy is long gone. Maybe he will be back with ammunition and reinforcements. On the other hand, though, I would like to believe that part of him still recognizes me. As I muse, shafts of milky light pierce the charcoal gray cloud cover.

Under the rays of the harvest moon, I feel my wounds beginning to mend. My skin appears to become liquid as new flesh flows into the gashes left by Tommy's gun. My toes begin to twitch. In the same way that the sun radiates Vitamin D during the day, the moonlight now fills my cells with its otherworldly medicine.

The dawn of a new night also refreshes my spirit. Despite the acute torment, I *know* that my troubles will expire before I do. After all, my parents always told me to persevere—even when life no longer makes sense.

# The Vigilantes

## Charles Pinteem: The Critter

There must be something in the water of Votsboro. Maybe we have radioactive elements in our soil or something. The EPA will probably order a mass evacuation of the town someday, but most of us will be staying put until then.

For the past three generations, every child born in Votsboro has had *some* kind of birth defect. The lucky babies came out of the womb with only an inconspicuous patch of red. Others emerged deformed. No two cases were the same, but I drew the genetic wildcard. I entered the world with gray skin, red irises, and long-toed rodent feet.

Mama called me *Chip*. My childhood bullies called me “Rat Boy.” My best friend’s conspiracy nut parents called me “Demon Child.” My high school crushes called me “Never in a million years.” My stepdad called me “Get out of my house, or I swear I’ll pull the trigger!” My real dad still hasn’t called me at all.

Spirituality has never been a huge part of my life, but I know that there’s gotta be someone in the spirit world looking out for me. I’ve survived more traps and toxins than I care to mention, and over half of those near-death experiences were my fault. Those escapes feel like hollow victories now, though. I’d barely managed to save my *own* skin! Now look at me—Chip the Critter—rescuing the princess and stuff.

## Guadalupe Reyes: La Vaquera

The working men of San Emilio are all the same. They spend every second of free time ranting and raving about things they cannot control. They pat one another on the back for their big talk in between menial tasks. Then they go home and expect to be in *complete* control!

Somehow, the retirees are even worse. In the diner where I worked, they still linger in the afternoons. They do not wish to manipulate women up-close; they only wish to prod their minds from a safe, comfortable distance.

“¿*Dónde está tu hombre, señorita?*” (Where’s your man, little lady?) Every time I would visibly show agitation, they would follow-up with their favorite line.

“¿*Aye! ¿Estás enojada? ¿Necesitas un esposo cálmarte!*” (Oh! You’re angry? You need a husband to calm you down!)

“My family raised me for a life in the rodeo,” I once told a coworker, “not . . . whatever this is!”

“Yeah?” she responded. “Well, my pop always expected me to marry rich, but that ain’t happenin’ either!” Later that same day, I saw the writing on the walls in the form of a poster. I saw an opportunity to reject idle talk and take action. The poster read:

*¡SE BUSCA VIGILANTES!*

VIGILANTES WANTED!

### J. Atticus Stoker: Father Firearms

In any period of history, the real movers and shakers are the ones who aren’t quite right in the head. The crazy people who never learn to forgive become society’s villains; the crazy people who have been taught mercy become its heroes. I’ve been on both ends of that spectrum. When several of the largest prisons in the United States experienced simultaneous jailbreaks, I was able to recognize at least one inmate from each prison on the news. I’m not their brother anymore, though.

The massive jailbreaks across the nation forced the understaffed police force to launch a recruitment campaign for vigilantes and bounty hunters.

Vigilantes have no dress code, but the cops at the station *did* make me cover the gang-related tattoos on my biceps. I decided to baptize them in fire by getting two full ink-sleeves of flames. I look like a muscle-bound phoenix now.

From my perch in the rafters, I witness the entire scene. The ambassador's daughter—the princess—sits chained to a chair in the center of the warehouse. A pool of dirty-gold light illuminates her. The situation is an obvious trap, but Charlie and Lupe know what they're getting into. The princess probably expects a US Army SWAT team to come for her. I will never forget the look on her face as she realizes that a Latina cowgirl and a teenage mouse-man have come to save the day instead. I stroke my mountain man beard and watch the scene, waiting for my cue.

Thugs emerge from behind shipping crates like ants from their hill. Vaquera whips out her pistol and lands several well-placed bullets in the chests of nearby attackers. In between shots, she swings her lasso with her other hand. Its loop ensnares thugs' ankles to throw them off balance.

Anyone who gets too close has to deal with Critter. The kid is fast. He's not fast enough to outrun a car or anything, but he's explosively quick in short bursts—like a scurrying rodent. He uses a combination of kickboxing and parkour to prevent any thugs from laying a finger on his tag-team partner.

Charlie's not the only one who's got her back, though, and Lupe's not the only one packing heat. They saved the best piece for the veteran. The nose of my sniper rifle rises, smelling the danger and fun in the air, and I load a fresh banana clip into it. I pick off the henchmen on the edges of the pack. Some produce pistols from their pockets. My shots neutralize their threat before they can aim. I lower my weapon and cross myself three times. (The old OCD mandates that I do it three times every time.) Then I raise my communicator to my mouth.

"We're ready whenever you are, Geary."

### John Francis Geary: Gearshift the Getaway Kid

Sometimes the bounty hunters like to rib me about my nickname. They want to know why I'm the Getaway Kid, not the Getaway Man or the Getaway King. After all, why would a balding, middle-aged man with wire-rim glasses and a bushy mustache let his coworkers call him a kid? My answer is simple: John Geary may have grown up, but his inner child lives on. I refuse to let the men in suits take him from me.

It was as a kid that I figured out how to navigate the world of society. Traveling directions have always come second-nature to me, but social cues are another beast entirely. I taught myself to imagine my psyche as a car transmission. With practice, I learned to shift my brain from son-gear to brother-gear to lover-gear to friend-gear to subordinate-gear to boss-gear, depending on the situation. Learning to drive with a manual transmission was easy by comparison.

Over my walkie-talkie radio, I dial into Police Chief Pyke's frequency.

"I can have the princess and my team out of the building and over the bridge in seven minutes flat."

"Make it five," comes his gruff reply. My Jaguar emerges from the shadows, slips through an open garage door, and prowls its way up to the side of the warehouse.

I open the doors. The girl rushes into the getaway car. She tries to make small talk with me. I tell her that we can chitchat after we are out of harm's way. In my mind's eye, I see a stoplight hovering in front of my car. It's a drag racing stoplight: three sets of twin yellows and one set of twin greens. (There's also a pair of red lights, but I've never needed those.)

Yellow.

Charles, Guadalupe, and Atticus climb into the car. They buckle in. They know the drill. Each member of the team takes turns congratulating the others, and I become the audience to a play-by-play recap of their rescue mission.

Yellow.

Chief Pyke's voice crackles in my radio.



“I hope you’re feeling froggy, John, ‘cause you’re about to miss the jump.”

Yellow . . . .

Green!

The sole of my foot embraces the gas pedal with the forceful tenderness of a man who knows his instrument better than he knows his own mind. The solid scenery around us melts into a tunnel of liquid blurs. Three corner-turns later, I enter the road that leads to the river. In the distance, I see the drawbridge transform from a single road into two ramps. My foot knows the speed I need to reach in order to compensate for my lack of momentum, and it presses the pedal accordingly.

Like an arrow from Apollo’s bow, the car soars into the open air. I hear screams, but the confident purr of the engine steadies my hand. I check the dashboard clock. It’s six in the morning. Breakfast at the mess hall should be ready any minute now. The vehicle lands on the other side of the river with a roller coaster *clunk*, and we ride off into the sunrise.

## Hide the Shiny Skeleton

The five-inch rod of metal—a magic wand of sorts—meets my fingertips with a cold salutation. In about a minute, the device screeches to life. Tiny lightning bolts arc from its tip, dissolving into thin air. I use my mirror to find the pressure points on my face. Then I prod each one with the wand. The skin of my face sags as if I were a wax sculpture in the process of melting. Reaching into my mouth, I peel back the cowl of faux flesh to reveal my true face. A chrome skull with pinpoints of blue light for eyes stares back at me from the mirror. Tangles of multicolored wires flow down its shining vertebrae.

Sometimes I have nightmares about myself, but I'm never the monster in them. In one dream, a truly human version of me walks up to my bedside. He snatches my pillow from me, he lifts the pillow overhead, the pillow morphs into a boulder, and he crushes my CPU. In the other dream, I am a specimen in a zoo. Sleek, beautiful automatons even more majestic than organic humans pity me from behind glass. Their polished armor, translucent skin, and glimmering eye-lenses stand in stark contrast to my naked frame of wires and metal bones. In every dream, my thoughts and movements are painfully sluggish.

Dad doesn't know that I know, and I plan to keep it that way. After all, he worked so hard to construct this façade. I'm a marvel of engineering, but the world will never know. Growing up, he was the epitome of a nerd. I know about his childhood through stories he has told. Also, my younger brother is exactly like him. No, really—he's ninety-nine percent identical to the way Dad was at his age. When I was a few years old, Dad's colleagues perfected human cloning. He used their findings to make a flesh-and-blood test tube baby. My brother's irises are milky white and ringed with black, making his eyes look like targets (the telltale sign of a synthetic human). He wears special contact lenses that create the illusion of green eyes.

Needless to say, my father and brother share a special bond. . . because they are the same guy! The latter always knows the right words to say to the former. Sometimes, they don't need to say anything; they exchange meaning via knowing looks while my CPU scrambles to decode their nonverbal signals.

My brother never lorded anything over me, though. We did not share many opinions, but we shared almost everything else. When Dad would get mad at me, my brother was always quick to talk him down. With me, Dad would frequently appropriate an oldschool catchphrase:

“What’s your malfunction?” (The figure of speech made *much* more sense after I discovered my true nature.)

Our arguments would always cause warm pulses to flood my spinal column, but neither my brother nor I could stay angry with Dad. He’s just the freakishly smart kid who grew into a brilliant wallflower, acquired scholarships, stacked his resume with S.T.E.M. degrees, became financially stable, made only a handful of friends, forgot how to seek love, and used technology to craft two sons and roleplay as a quirky single parent. It could happen to anyone, really.

We never left Votsboro, but most of our friends have. I don’t mind the anonymity, though. In fact, I believe that our new neighbors are finally getting used to my stilted personality! If only I could . . . .

“Five minutes!” Dad calls from downstairs. I re-apply my real boy costume quickly but thoroughly; I dare not face my world—or my family—without it.

# Felix Fluke

## ACT I

Snow sprinkled the pine trees like powdered sugar. A highway slithered through crevices in the mountains. On the otherwise-still morning, a semitruck glided across the asphalt. Felix leaned into the passenger window of the truck, feeling the door press and release his torso with every winding turn. A mile marker caught his eye.

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His bony legs, clad in a pair of black jeans, both bobbed on the carpet. His gray, oversized hoodie swallowed his white t-shirt. A fringe of emerald hair hung in his face.

“Can we, uh. . .” ventured the boy, avoiding eye contact with the trucker, “can we listen to music or something?”

“I’m more of a talk radio guy myself,” the driver responded.

“That’s fine,” said the kid. “I’ll take anything that’s not more silence.” The trucker flipped to a random AM station. There a fatherly voice consoled a frantic, teenage voice.

“It’s about realizing who you are, Melanie,” instructed the man.

“And I know my status as a daughter,” Melanie answered, starting her statement with an *and* as if her words were the continuation of a half-formed thought, “but I *just* want to now God’s will for my life.”

“Are you sure about that?” Felix blurted out. In response, the trucker roared in laughter. “I’m serious,” protested the young passenger. “Learning grand, heavy truths about life can make you a heavy-hearted person.” The trucker silenced the radio.

“What would you know about ‘heavy truths’?” The younger one answered with a shrug:

“I’m just old enough to know a thing or two.”

“Are you chummy with God then?”

“He’s a good boss,” the boy answered, triggering another round of chuckles from his driver. The older man questioned him further:

“What exactly is your mission from God?”

“To drift from place to place, spreading good fortune wherever I go and reminding people that God hasn’t given up on them—that’s my mission. Sometimes it’s the small strokes of good fortune that make all the difference, you know?”

His acquaintance only shook his head, suppressed another outburst, and focused on his wrestling match with the steering wheel. The road came to a head at a cracked, pothole-ridden intersection. The welcome sign for Votsboro glared at them from the other side of the street. The trucker parked next to a gas pump and fumbled for his credit card.

“Don’t waste your money here,” the kid told him. Placing his hand on the dashboard, Felix caused every needle in the truck’s instrument cluster to glow with an emerald hue. A faint gurgle filled the gas tanks under their feet as the gasoline needle climbed from E to F. “I’ll see you in Heaven someday,” he told the older man before grabbing his water canteen and venturing into Votsboro. He walked around the back of the gas station, drumming on each of the dumpsters with his still-glowing fingers as he went. “Good luck, dumpster divers.”

Felix trekked through parking lots and open fields. Locals squinted at the outsider while providing lip service in the form of polite greetings. Many

heads turned to observe the green-haired kid marching down the shoulder of the town's main boulevard. His feet eventually found their way into a thicket, where a navy blue tool shed stood guard at the edge of the trees.

Spotting an outcropping of rocks behind the shed, Felix proceeded to tap them with his fingers. Several of them replied with the tiny thud of a struck stone, but one greeted him with the crisp *thwack* of plastic. He parted the plastic stone into halves; it split perfectly along a fissure. Inside lay a single key on a bed of packing foam. Felix gained access to the shed, slipped the key into his pocket, and contorted his arm to re-fasten the shed's padlock from the inside. Then, he allowed his fatigue to overtake him.

The all-to-familiar sound of handheld thunder woke the traveler. A slender column of light streamed through the shed's newly-formed peephole. Outside, brass clinked against the coarse dirt, followed by a courtesy call:

"You've got ten seconds to get outta there!"

Felix's hands trembled as he unfastened the lock. He shoved the shed doors aside and burst over the threshold. A girl in flannel greeted him with a pistol in hand.

"What were you doing in our shed?"

"I don't want any trouble," he pleaded. "My name is Felix, and I'm just a drifter who needed a place to stay." She eyed him for a minute, clutching her weapon, until she found spotted the fake stone.

"You want to come inside for some breakfast, stranger?"

"Wait. Really?"

The boy sat at the kitchen table, using a soup spoon to shovel eggs, bacon, and hash browns into his maw. The girl ate a sandwich with one hand and kept her gun trained on the interloper with the other.

“So, Felix,” she began, “how exactly did you know where to find the spare key to our shed?” Felix explained:

“My grandparents owned this land before your family did. They’re the ones who originally bought the shed and the lock.”

“You still got kin in town?”

“Not anymore. I’m the last one.”

“Why did you run away?”

“I was being chased by . . . by my natural predator: Nils Seren.”



Seren’s hair, as red as the feathers of a cardinal, bowed to the will of his comb as he sculpted it into a classy side part. With the convenience store’s only bathroom occupied, he used the glass of the convenience store’s refrigerator to inspect his black nylon jacket, the maroon undershirt that peeked through the unbuttoned top half of that jacket, and his black jeans.

“Hey, buddy!” yelled the cashier, “you gonna buy something or not?” Seren opened the fridge door and took out a four-pack of vintage, bottled soda. Next to a plastic dish of pennies, a rack of bagged peanuts caught his eye.

“These any good?” he asked the employee.

“Honestly, bro, I’m allergic. It’s actually pretty bad.”

“Well, in *that* case,” Seren joked, playfully sliding the peanut display further away from the cash register.

“Nah, man. It’s all good as long as they stay in the bag.” He scanned the items’ barcodes. “Anything else, bud?”

“Yes!” Seren pulled a photograph of Felix out of his pocket. “Have you seen this boy?” The cashier glared at him.

“I don’t think I can tell you that,” the employee retorted. “Maybe he doesn’t want to be found.”

“He might not want it,” snapped Seren, “but his being found will be the best thing for him—for all of us.”

“Why don’t you just mind your business, OK?”

“Maybe you’re right,” murmured Seren.

He pretended to consider the advice for a second. Then he lobbed the bag of peanuts toward the cashier. A red blaze momentarily enveloped the bag, and it exploded into a cloud of peanut dust and shredded plastic. The cashier coughed and wheezed. He doubled over behind the counter.

“Hey!” a heavysset man hollered from the back of the store, “What kinda witchcraft was that?”

“The effective kind,” Seren replied coldly.

As the cashier’s limp form fell to the floor, the heavysset man brandished a butterfly knife. Seren casually picked a penny from the coin dish. The would-be vigilante charged. Seren tossed the penny like a miniature frisbee. The flying coin left a trail of red sparks in the air. It sailed at the perfect angle to slip in between the man’s lips and strike his uvula. He too started to gag. The knife dropped from his fingers. He started to stagger, securing himself against a store shelf. His forceful coughs caused his eyes to water. Seren grabbed two soda bottles, threw them in the air while walking down the store aisle, caught the bottles upside-down, and clubbed the man over the head with both of them. The bottles shattered, and the heavy man collapsed.



Seren noticed a set of SUV keys hanging from the man's beltloop. "Well, mister," he said, "I just treated you to two free pops, so I'd say that you owe me a favor." He picked up the whole keyring. The young warlock then turned around to retrieve his picture from the counter, but the photograph was gone. In the distance, he heard the store's backdoor slam.



"Kate, how many times have I told you that gas station bathrooms are nast—?" Felix's captor had set down her sandwich to take a call on her cell phone. She continued to half-heartedly threaten him with the pistol as her friend screamed into her ear through the device. "Are you OK?!" she inquired. "You should be more care. . . a flame-headed wizard?" She repeated the phrase in an incredulous tone. Felix's eyes widened. He attempted to stand up, but her eyes drilled into his with a *watch yourself* glare.

"Do you have it in front of you right now? Yes? Well, what, uh . . ." her gaze bounced from Felix to the house's front window and back to Felix. "What does the boy in the picture look like—exactly?" After a pause, the girl whispered an obscenity. "We *need* to get to my car," she ordered Felix.

## ACT II

"The cops found Kate hiding in a dumpster, " the girl told Felix after the call had ended, "but the wizard kid was already gone."

"I'm glad she's safe," Felix said.

"Yeah. Now let's keep *ourselves* safe!" she exclaimed. "By the way, you can call me *Nancy*." The car cruised along a dirt frontage road while Nancy and Felix got to know one another.

"What lead you to want to come back?" asked Nancy.

“The Boss Man spoke to me in a dream and told me to come back home.”

“Boss Man?”

“God,” he clarified.

“So, you’re religious, then?” she probed.

“Lucklets like me don’t have much of a choice.”

“What’s a ‘lucklet’?”

“We’re a subspecies of the Nephilim, which is a fancy way to say that we have a little angel blood in our veins. If a Nephil turns evil, that angel blood gets corrupted and becomes demon blood. Once an angel makes that fall and becomes a demon, there’s no going back. Demons and Nephilim with demon blood are basically going to Hell no matter what. That’s why Seren is so relentless. He has nothing left to lose except his power over others.”

“OK . . . . Do folks call them ‘lucklets’ because they control luck or something?”

“Exactly.” Nancy smirked in response.

“Prove it, Halo Boy!”

“Alright! Take me to the nearest stoplight.”

Nancy found an intersection near the highway. She measured her speed so that the light turned yellow before she reached it. Felix’s hand, which had been hanging freely out of the passenger window, rose toward the traffic signal. A slender javelin of green fire shot from his palm into the signal. The yellow light reverted to green, and Nancy and Felix passed through the intersection.

“Shee-yoot!” sang Nancy. “You must never have to wait an the crosswalk, huh?”

“Well, not really. I can’t use my luck powers on myself. I *have* caught some lucky breaks on the road, though. I guess the Boss Man is looking out for me.”

“If he’s looking out for you, why is He letting Nils hunt you?”

“I don’t know. As far as I can tell, Nils either wants (A) to have my powers to himself or (B) to kill me. If I was God, I’d stop him, but I’m not Him; I’m just one of his little lucklets. I have a theory, though. I do think that God has some sort of master plan for everything, but the plan is *so* complicated that He’s the only one who can fully understand the whole thing. At this point, I don’t need to know the whole plan. I just need to know what my next move is gonna be. By the way . . . where are we headed?”

“The empty horse stables,” replied Nancy. “My family owns several livestock pastures around Votsboro, but we haven’t done any equestrian business in a good minute.”

“Did you abandon the stables because of the economy?”

“Kinda. My dad’s ex-wife—the woman he was married to before my mom—has done everything in her power to ruin our reputation around town. Most people don’t want anything to do with us, so hired hands are hard to come by.”

The warm hues of dusk blanketed the landscape as the two pulled up at the indoor stables. Nancy gave Felix a sleeping bag that she had been storing in the trunk of her car for emergencies. They got out and stood in the pool of light created by Nancy’s headlamps.

“Happy trails,” said Nancy. “It’s been cool getting to know you, and I hope that the Boss keeps being kind to you.”

“Right back at ya,” responded Felix.

Nancy’s car churned a pillar of dust into the twilight air as she departed. Felix settled into a horse stall, using an untied hay bale as a pillow. He awoke to the sight of a glowing, red handprint on the front door.

### ACT III

Submitting to Seren’s sorcery, the bolts in the door hinges crumbled to metal shavings, and Nils pushed the door over with only a light shove. The warlock grinned so widely that his smile forced him to squint.

“Nancy Granger? Really? You made friends with No-Good Nan? When I told people that you were with *her*, they were more than happy to help me track you down.” Seren doffed his nylon jacket, revealing the physique of a junior varsity athlete (with just enough muscle mass to inspire hubris in a teenage boy). His sleeveless undershirt allowed Felix to see luminous, crimson energy spreading through his blood vessels.

The fugitive boy scrambled to his bony feet. The collar of his shirt became a firepit as a column of emerald flames enveloped his head. A lime-colored inferno swallowed each fist.

“That’s it?” Seren taunted. “You’re gonna give me your energy without a fight?” Felix blasted two streams of green fire into the stables front wall. The wood rotten instantly. Felix’s new favorite sound grew nearer and nearer.

Before Seren could turn around, Nancy's car crashed through the dilapidated planks. She swerved, and the backend of the vehicle knocked the dark lucklet off of his feet. Seren rolled backwards over the trunk and landed in a heap on the floor. Nancy held her pistol as she stepped out of the car.

"I had a nagging feeling that you still needed me," she explained to Felix while leveling her gun at Nils.

"Squib load!" shrieked Seren. A single flame from his fingertips reached Nancy's hand before she pulled the trigger. Her weapon clicked, but the bullet never left the gun barrel. Seren rose to one knee.

"You just don't get it, Fluke!" said the predator. "I don't give people bad luck; I drain the good luck out of them. Even if your energy isn't intended for me, I can absorb it through the air. The closer you are, the faster I heal and the stronger I get!"

"I would've learned that sooner if you'd been able to catch me sooner," quipped Felix. Seren masked his rage with a strained smile.

"First time for everything, bud! You!" Seren turned to Nancy. "Go back home. This doesn't concern you."

"No," replied Nancy.

"Have it your way," he said with a shrug.

Sprinting, Nils closed the gap between himself and Felix. The rival lucklets grabbed one another by the shoulders. Green energy reluctantly surged from Felix's veins and arteries into Seren's. Felix's hair darkened in color; Seren's beamed. Nancy shielded her eyes from the blinding light show.

“You knew this would happen eventually, Fluke! Admit it: your God wants me to win!” The angelic lucklet gave no reply, but tightened his grip on the teenage sorcerer.

Emerald sparks leapt out of Seren’s chest, soaking into Felix’s fingers. Locks of his hair faded from dark green to brown to orange to cardinal red. His white shirt glowed hot pink.

“What are you—?” cried Seren.

“I’M—TAKING—MY—LUCK—BACK!” A mixture of green and red energy filled the blood vessels of both lucklets. A small, furious vortex formed between them. Neither of them paid it any mind until it flattened and erupted as a colorless shockwave. The wave temporarily knocked the air out of both boys and propelled them backwards. Seren’s hair faded to blonde, and every hair on Felix’s head grew jet black. Seren lifted his eyes a little too late and caught a pistol-whipping from Nancy. He fell into the hay, and she holstered her weapon.

“How did you know that that would work?” Nancy asked Felix.

“I didn’t,” he said, struggling to stand. “Since our powers are polar opposites, I figured that maybe we could cancel each other out.”

“Did your angel blood spoil and turn into demon blood?”

“No,” Felix responded, “but it came dangerously close.” Less than ten feet away, a first responder’s siren wailed. Nancy and Felix turned to see a squad of cop cars approaching. Their blue-and-red inferno illuminated the property.



“So,” Felix began, drumming his fingers on the Granger kitchen table, “how does it feel to have the Votsboro cops side with you for once?”

“I’m not gonna lie; it’s pretty sweet. This town has finally found someone it likes even less than my clan. That’s enough about me, though . . . .” She left the kitchen and returned with a stack of lined paper.

“Fill out your information on this.”

“What for?”

“This here is your official application to become the Grangers’ newest hired hand.” Felix could only sit in stunned silence, so Nancy continued. “You can live on this property as long as you want, but you have to do your share of the work.” The former lucklet smiled as he wrote out his full name: Felix Tyrese Fluke.

“*Tyrese?!* ” Nancy teased. “That’s an awfully black name for such a pale fella, don’t ya think?”

“Yeah, well, some yard work’ll be good for my complexion.” He paused. “I’m gonna miss my powers, Nan, but I’m glad to know that I don’t always need them to make kind people more fortunate.”

## Fort Corpse

Grant Landry's first kiss was not what he had expected. He had learned the hard way that his girlfriend, Viola Mendez, was Patient Zero. She still looked mostly human and mostly alive at the time. Grant's hormones banished all caution from his mind. Viola turned her head sideways, opened her mouth to an unnatural width, and clamped her jaws onto the corners of his mouth. Grant now has no skin between his nose and his lower lip, but he doesn't seem to mind. He and his lady are now royalty among the living dead.

Upon receiving news of the virus, Votsboro law enforcement officials had barricaded Viola and Grant's neighborhood from the rest of the city. They felt confident in their ability to contain the lethargic cadavers—unlike a lycanthropy outbreak, which would have warranted a mass evacuation. The barricade grew more elaborate over the following months until an entire suburb was surrounded by a prison wall. Locals dubbed the enclosure *Fort Corpse*.

Viola and Grant enjoy special privileges among the zombie population. As Patient Zero and Patient One, respectively, they wield a kind of inborn authority over others of their kind. Grant now bears his skinless grin as a mark of nobility, and Viola has finally found a man who will not leave her.

Zombies mate for life, after all. In the absence of living humans, they have been forced to procreate. The process is similar to that of regular humans, but the birthing process more closely resembles that of an aphid. The young—usually multiples—eat their way out of the womb. Those young corpses will be cannibals until they reach maturity. Animated corpses who have their heads crushed in brawls or freak accidents become carrion for



infants. A biweekly delivery of Votsboro's roadkill feeds the adults, who can survive on the flesh of anything.

Votsboro's department of tourism recently set up a firm scaffolding with a guard rail around the perimeter of Fort Corpse's walls. The truly-living can gaze with horror and awe at the exotic creatures within. Tourists can order drone photographs and *I (heart) FC* t-shirts (with bite marks in the heart logo).

Visitors and residents of nearby neighborhoods are completely safe from the corpses. Local pathologists have concluded that the zombie virus can only be transmitted through physical contact with the blood of a living person. A cure may be possible, they say, but the idea has failed to generate interest.

"I wouldn't hold my breath about that issue" said Mayor Petrey. "I mean, why sink hundreds of thousands of dollars of research into a medicine that will only cripple our tourism industry? I mean, they're not even human anymore! Look at 'em!"

Viola, Grant, and their kingdom of the undead are not and never will be *our* problem . . . right?

# Above a Pedestrian: A William Faulkner Tribute

“I might not be a driver yet, but I’m a skater: now that’s two steps above a pedestrian.” He said it as if the distance, the inch or so separating the soles of his feet from the pavement which his wheels ground into subjugation, served in some way to buttress him against that amorphous and ubiquitous pity. The comrade sat three feet removed from him, but perhaps closer in spirit than the confessor’s brother had ever been.

The comrade (Mitchell Joseph), notwithstanding the presence of a futon—beaten by the force of collapsing bodies within an inch of its life; since every useful item in a household that has come to radiate the family’s ambiance possesses a lifetime in the same way that an inert element can possess a half-life—in the dust-glazed living room, knelt in a ceremonious manner before the confessor (Blake Anderson).

“Just tell it like you remember it, hey?”

“It is in my blood to be a U.S. Army Ranger, y’hear? In by blood!” Mitchell nodded solemnly, all the while he thinking *Oh, Lord. Here we go again! Not that beginning! Again with the in-my-blood talk!*

The infamous *in-my-blood talk*, which had infected the air with an effluvium of haughtiness, now stoking the flames of “He said” and “She said” among a family reunion already embattled in controversy, now inviting—though unwittingly—a chuckle from eavesdroppers in public, now provoking Juarez to employ one of those signature threats that seemed to sit snugly, purposefully, nestled in the crevices of his grey matter like so many arrows in a quiver.

“I might not be a driver yet——”

“All right!” said Mitchell. “You just said that!”

“Said what?” Blake asked no more; not aloud. The not-saids churned beneath the surface of the confessor’s psyche: a Janus-faced torrent of *Who does he think he is? Who in the Nine Realms does Juarez think he is with his clunker truck collection and his cholo vampire—(But a true future ranger would have been prepared)—Are you challenging the blood?—(No. Maybe there’s just not enough of it yet)—Right. Maybe when I have the feet to fill pap’s combat boots, and the chest and arms to fill his BDUs—(Yeah!)—Well that settles it.*

“Well that settles it,” said Blake. “Juarez is a worthy opponent, to be sure, but my blood will overcome him yet!”

The confessor grinned, exhibiting that selfsame swagger that had tainted the family reunions (“in my blood!”) and spawned the public embarrassments (“in my blood!”) and caused encounters with neighbors and with *their* various strains of blood. And the comrade:

“What does any of this have to do with Mr. Juarez?”

“Agh! Sar’n Rexton won’t let me hear the end of it!” Said Blake.

“You think Rexton’ll turn you down over a goose egg?”

“It’s an officer thing, Mitch!”

“But you’re not even——”

“*Future!* It’s an officer *and future officer* thing, Mitch: and I wouldn’t expect you to get it!”

It had been a spring of shrubbery when Blake first ventured into the office and encountered the recruiter——that Sergeant Rexton : a man blunt and hard-boiled and honest as the day is long (provided it is a December day).

He waxing eloquent: “Come on in, son. Set yourself down. If you could just fill out some basic information . . . Hey! My uncle lived in that neighborhood once! He had to move out after a wild coyot’ ate his cat! Enough about his past, though. Let’s talk about your future. How would you like to be a hero for God and country? Huh? You were born with what? Aw! Don’t sweat it; I’m sure we can get you a waiver for it. You *do* wanna make your pa proud, don’t ya? A’right. You think about it. Go home and think about how you can do right by your bloodline.”

Juarez had not been impressed to hear of it. The not-yet-confessor felt no great physical intimidation from him (he being a fellow of that soft definition of jawline and chin which will one day require a mountaineer’s beard (both to conceal the features and to remind onlookers that they had once existed before their dissolution into a singular, cylindrical mass of putty) paired with an almost childlike physique which prompted, not pity (Pity would have been the last item on any self-respecting Chicano’s list of desirable accolades.) but a type of delicacy with which the adults conducted conversation with the neighbor), only the inexplicable aversion to proximity that repels the apex predators of the rainforest from brightly-colored frogs.

“Move your ruckus somewhere else . . . or I’ll sic my pet Chupacabra’n yeh!” the neighbor had said when occasion permitted it.

“And that’s exactly what he did tonight, Mitch!” said Blake.

“Wait just a minute. You’re telling me that that neighbor, who never follows through with what he says he’s gonna do (for good or bad), but always surprises the *barrio* with some decision straight outta left field;—this neighbor not only kept his word for a change, but made good on a threat that he’d have to defy the laws of nature for?”

“Yes!”

"You're telling me that this thing (lizard-dog-demon) chased you for two blocks until you reached the Edgars'——"

"The Morrisons'," said the confessor.

"You reached the Morrisons' house, but the board had a little farther to go, didn't it? It must've gone all the way to the intersection at the bottom of the hill (where Dr. Lee keeps his boat (Since its always on top of that trailer and never in water, though, I think of it as a giant, boat-shaped boxcar just waiting to roll into the street.) and that old jalopy on cinderblocks) and been torn to shreds by a painters' van or something."

"Sounds about right. That sounds like what I remember of it," he said.

"Well, I still say you're not remembering straight if you thought that the animal was a Chupacabra and not some kind of mutt."

"I say you'd have to be there," said Blake ("And an officer or future officer," he added after some time, after the duration of the conversation had run its course without his realizing it.) before drifting into a state not unlike sleep, but without its inherent rejuvenation.

A shadow, softly defined in jawline, glided across the partially translucent shutters. No sooner did the *wrap! wrap! wrap!* upon the door sound than Mitchell's morbid curiosity drew him toward the peephole. The neighbor and the splintered board and blue blazes and red blazes met the eyes of the comrade all at once in a flurry of realization and deeper consternation. He opened the door.

"Cops?"

"No. EMT," said the neighbor. He (Juarez) held out the token of Blake's splintered pride, a kind of contraband from the make-believe war with a creature simultaneously more and less imposing than the shedding of denial.

“You might wanna take this.” Mitchell the comrade, now bereaved midwife, cradled the miscarried half-boards.

“Your pet—?”

“Ain’t got no pet, *chico*.”

The medics wasted no time, now questioning, now escorting the would-be self-resurrector from the mouth of the abode, that living room of evening recalibration, the man-cave and son-of-man-cave that Mr. Joseph had purchased at the price of his labor.

“Kid’ll be fine,” said Juarez. The comrade, demanding justification for the levity with which the neighbor spoke:

“You really think so, hey?”

“He’s not the kinda guy who stays down when he’s knocked down. It’s . . . it’s just in his blood, y’know?”

## The Silent Banshee

The saddest angel in Heaven is voiceless. Instead of feathers, his wings are made from tattered strips of sackcloth—the fabric of mourning. An unkempt mane of auburn hair flows from his scalp onto the back of his neck.

Sometimes he appears with a vision or your loved one by his side. He stands close enough that you can see your relative or friend move, breathe, and smile one last time. Like any decent bearer of bad news, he weeps with those who weep. By the time you see your loved one's likeness standing beside him, it is already too late to save them. To murderers, he appears with a replica of the murder weapon in hand. The killer will usually hallucinate, seeing and feeling blood on his or her hands where there is none.

The silent banshee loves the hearing impaired. He can communicate freely with them, using any and every form of sign language ever devised. He always refers to them as *sister* or *brother*, he always says that he is sorry, and he always means it. Sometimes he appears without visible wings, holding nothing and doing nothing to draw attention to himself. He only stares in pity because he knows that you already know. He then retires to his Father's house to weep.

# Molar

*Trigger warning: This short story contains themes of self-harm.*

At the Votsboro Cryptozoological Research Facility where I work, we keep samples of the zombies from Fort Corpse—among other oddities. Our hope is to prevent another outbreak. (Who knows? If Fort Corpse ever stops being a tourist trap, we might even get the funding for a cure.) One sample in particular—a fragmented molar tooth from Patient Five—catches my eye on a daily basis. I cannot help but fantasize about infecting myself with it.

The deed would not require the application of much pressure; I would only need to tickle a vein with the unsmooth edge of a molar fragment until the enamel shank parted my blood vessel as if it were a pair of curtains. As soon as the infected tooth chip dipped into the scarlet stream, I would experience an onset of terror, which I would smother with effected composure. I would bandage the cut and tell my coworkers that I had hurt myself in the kitchen. I would go to bed exhausted and acutely irritated at nothing in particular. Between one and three in the morning, I would awake as one of them, cured from overthinking.

On that day, there would probably be several lobbyists camping on my front lawn. They frequently show up to my home and my colleagues' homes, demanding for the VCRF to release 100% of its cryptid data to the public (even the inconclusive findings). I could give several of them a piece of my mind in the form of a diplomatic bite to the collarbone. By then, a local police officer would probably arrive to drill a 9mm round through my reanimated scalp.

That scenario will never *actually* play out, though. Every time I find myself lusting after the power of the molar, I end up walking away. I chose



this career to help people make sense of this chaotic world through my research. A zombified version of me would be invulnerable to physical and psychological pain, but the truly-living version of me—the version of me who takes care of himself—has the greatest potential to help people.

## Truck & Tröll

On the north end of Votsboro and around the shores of Lake Skogi lies the community of Little Iceland (even littler than the real thing). At the gates, a massive pedestal of cement bears a plaque that reads, “TRÖLLIÐ VOTSBOROS” (THE TROLL OF VOTSBORO). Every day, the pedestal serves as the stage for a grotesque sculpture.

The stone figure measures almost twenty feet from head to toe, but it only stands seventeen feet tall because of its hunched back. A thick, overarching brow casts shadows over its sunken eyes. Sunrays, snow, and rain beat upon its barren scalp. A jagged stalactite of a goatee drips from its chin. The creature possesses two holes in the sides of its scalp where the ears should be. An enormous gut hangs over the waist of its loincloth, covering its rope belt. Webs of veins spread across its arms, and its knuckles literally drag against the ground at its sides. Stocky legs tipped with claws—like the hind legs of an overgrown crocodile—support the creature’s frame. A giant chameleon tail curls into a spiral behind its lower back. Everyone who enters the gates comes under the tröll’s dead-eyed stare.



Sandy and AJ divided their attention between the full moon and one another. They sat in AJ’s pickup, which he had parked near the edge of a scenic ravine.

“Humboldt U?” Sandy suggested.

“Nah,” said AJ. “Too expensive. My best bet is Olsen College in Cusp City. Didn’t you think about applying there?”

“Oh, I applied as soon as I could!” beamed Sandy. “I’ve already been accepted.”

“In *that* case, I *gotta* get accepted now!” Sandy laughed, but the buzzing of her phone interrupted her amusement.

“Who’s that?” asked AJ. The girl gave no answer. “It’s Raymond, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Ray has some . . . issues with letting go.”

“*How* long has it been since y’all been together? Four months? Half a year?”

“He still thinks of it as a recent event,” said Sandy.

“Is he going to Olsen too?” She shook her head.

“He’s not going to college. He’s joining his dad’s lumber company. I’ll . . . I’ll give him one more warning before blocking his number, OK?”

“Good,” AJ answered. “When you get him blocked, and we go off to Olsen together, he won’t be able to bother us no more.”

The couple sat in silence for a few minutes. Sandy played with her strands of prematurely gray hair. AJ stared at the birthmark on the back of his hand.

“I mean, I feel sorry for him, but that’s all. If I still had other feelings for him, we never would’ve—”

“Hold up!”

“Ray and I are done! I promise!”

“I’m not disagreein’ with you,” AJ replied. “I’m tryin’ a’ listen.”

“To what?”

They fell silent again, but a chorus of loose, rumbling stones filled the dead air. Looking down the gravel road that they had used to reach the ravine, Sandy and AJ noticed a square silhouette coming toward them. The rumbling grew into the growl of a diesel engine. In the gaps between the trees, glimpses of an oncoming semitruck flashed in and out of view, a hulking bundle of logs

strapped to its trailer. AJ swore. His hands furiously burrowed into his pockets.

“You *lost* them?” Sandy shrieked.

He met her gaze with a split-second of sheer panic before lunging into the backseat. The semitruck accelerated, on course to T-bone the pair into the ravine. AJ felt the floor behind the driver’s seat until his fingers grasped his letterman jacket. He slipped his hand into the jacket’s pocket and grabbed his keys.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sandy saw another silhouette barreling through the forest. She gasped as the newcomer’s form sprouted apelike arms. In an explosive burst, the creature leapt sideways, so that he faced the truck head-on. The driver threw himself from the vehicle, rolled to the side of the road, bolted to his feet, and sprinted into the woods with an adrenaline-fueled zeal.

At the moment of collision, the tröll wrapped his arms around the semitruck’s undercarriage. The hood crumpled against his gut. The windows imploded. The trailer jackknifed, but he broke its momentum with the scourge of his tail. He jumped with one foot and left the other foot planted, tilting his body and the truck’s cab onto their sides. Without hesitation, the creature disentangled himself from the wreckage.

Sandy and AJ watched as the tröll gradually rose from the gravel. He released the trailer’s cargo straps. Logs cascaded to the ground. He raised one of the logs to his mouth, biting it in half. The wood became saliva-soaked paper-mâché between his teeth. Then he noticed the two humans in the pickup. He regarded them stoically for a minute; then he lumbered away (so to speak) with his splintery bounty in tow.



On the north end of Votsboro and around the shores of Lake Skogi lies the community of Little Iceland (even littler than the real thing). At the gates, a massive pedestal of cement bears a plaque that reads, “TRÖLLIÐ VOTSBOROS” (THE TROLL OF VOTSBORO). Every night, the pedestal is unoccupied.

# The Vots

In Votsboro, the legacy of the Vot family is older than the dirt that the city was founded on. The clan built the original settlement at the head of the Quill Pen River, and they've lived by the water ever since. There must be something in that water, though, because none of them have aged a day in twenty years.

Mama Vot is like a cryptid. In high school, I never arrived early enough to get a good glimpse of her as she came in to work. She worked in an office block at the center of the building, off-limits to students. Was she an accountant? A switchboard operator? Did she torture the kids who got expelled? No one knew for sure, but the rumor mill kept the theories coming.

Votsboro knew her children all too well, though—all seven of them. Ranging from the ages of four to eighteen, they had grown up with the town's Gen X crowd. Then they just. . . stopped growing one day. I have been a peer to each of them at some point.

In preschool, I played with permanent four-year-old Avery. She had a gap in her front teeth, black, wiry hair, and skin like coffee with the smallest splash of milk added. She was my only friend at the time because she kept me to herself. Whenever another kid would get too close to me on the playground or talk to me for too long, Avery would cry:

"MY Ellie!" During indoor playtime, she loved to move us to a corner and build a castle of blocks around us.

Avery threw a fit on my fifth birthday, and things have never been the same between us since. When strangers saw us interact—which we did from time to time as I came of age—they tended to assume that she was merely a

grumpy tyke who refused to talk to me for arbitrary, infantile reasons, but those who knew our history knew better.

I met Dezmond during a school field trip to the museum. Being a couple of bored seven-year-olds, we gravitated toward one another, and we spent the entirety of that day whispering snide remarks back and forth. Dez has a lighter complexion than Avery, a flexible face capable of the most cartoonish expressions, and a helmet-sized afro like a comical sidekick in a tween sitcom. Everything was a joke to him.

“If everything is funny,” he once told me, “then nothing can hurt you enough to break your heart.” When I graduated to age eight, I suspect that he was hurt, but he didn’t show it. He merely found another class clown to latch onto.

Alicia was the kind of girl who wrote her name with the anarchy logo in lieu of the first A. I noticed her red-topped frohawk from across the cafeteria and decided to be a little daring. Together, we became quite the wild duo that year. . . at least as wild as a pair of decade-old schoolkids with bedtimes *can* be. She introduced me to my parents’ least favorite bands, taught me how to play dumb when caught trespassing, and showed me techniques for creating eye-catching designs with spray paint.

“It’s not vandalism if it makes the property *more* beautiful,” she said.

For my eleventh birthday, my family and I went to a local waterpark. My parents treated the event as a baptism of sorts because they knew that I was free from the clutches of Alicia Vot. She wrote a bittersweet breakup song for me, burning it onto a disc and slipping the disc into my backpack while I was distracted (in true Alicia fashion). It’s not the best song, but I love it to this day.

Every grade was its own little clique in Votsboro, so I went three full years without befriending another Vot. Then I almost cut my arm off in the second week of eighth grade woodshop (which is legal for some reason). The hand of Maggie Deb grabbed the safety grip and prevented the circular saw from collapsing onto my forearm. She glowered at me like I was an idiot—because I had been an idiot on that day—but when our last-period class was canceled, she and I sat in the school courtyard and bonded over some ridiculously complicated math homework while we waited for our parents to arrive.

Maggie Deb sported waist-length hair. I remember it being wiry like Avery's. When in the woodshop, however, the older sister tied her hair into a tight bun and covered her scalp with a bandana, becoming a dark-skinned Rosie the Riveter. She disappeared for about two weeks leading up to my fifteenth birthday, and she emerged on my birthday eve with a wooden plaque. Engraved on the plaque was a math equation, the extra credit question that had been my saving grace on the final exam. She even reproduced my handwriting (from my notes) with the inscription.

"Stay safe, Eliot," Maggie Deb warned me before nearly suffocating me with a hug and climbing into her brother's truck.

About a year later, I had the pleasure of getting to know that same brother as my own comrade. Most people refer to male sixteen-year-olds as boys, but Big Gage Vot was a sixteen-year-old gorilla of a man. He used to be an outstanding fullback for the high school . . . until his four years of eligibility ran out twenty years ago. He is still enrolled in the high school, but he never attends class anymore.

Apparently, the school is not interested in granting diplomas to undead forever-teens, so Big Gage no longer bothers. He sticks around as chauffeur and moving man for the school. Very few times have I seen him without a



steering wheel or a heavy object in his hands. The only small object I've every seen him hold is a paint roller. I caught him sitting crisscross in front of a half-painted wall in the school cafeteria. I tried to cross the room without distracting him, but he stopped me with a random question:

"What does this color say to you?"

"Uhhh...." I stared dumbfounded at the orange wall partially covered with a half-coat of baby blue paint. "The color looks. . . peaceful, I guess." "Good," said Gage. "The blue should hopefully create a tranquil atmosphere, but the hue is light enough that students won't be tempted to slip into a food coma during lunch. I like orange, but it's too campy and aggressively upbeat for a dining hall, almost mocking in a way. This shade of blue should help to create a more easygoing vibe." I took a seat beside him and got a good look at him for the first time.

Icy, blue eyes peered from his mocha face like a two-star constellation. A thunderhead beard obscured the lower half of his face. Intertwining dreadlocks leisurely stretched from his head to the tips of his shoulderblades. As he elaborated on the importance of balancing warm and cool colors, most of his impromptu lecture slipped into one ear and out of the other.

I sat there, slowly comprehending and basking in the revelation that Big Gage the Beast of Burden may have cared more about the school more than some honor students. Over the next week, he finished painting the cafeteria walls with a little help from me. He let me keep the last few ounces of the baby blue paint, saying, "You never know when you'll need some tranquility in your life." We never had a full conversation again after the paint job was finished, but Big Gage would still smile and wave at me when he saw me on campus or around town.

During my senior year of high school, the time came for me to face the music. When I accepted a position as the conductor's assistant for the school

jazz ensemble, I only wanted to earn the volunteer hours I needed to graduate with honors; I got more than I bargained for.

Vot twins Hiram and Hugh were my anchors that year. Over the course of Christmas break, I managed to begin and end a relationship with the oboist. She wouldn't talk to me during our last semester, and the lack of closure was eating away at me. One day, after rehearsal, Hiram and Hugh held me hostage (sort of).

As I started to leave, Hiram blocked my path.

"We know you're not OK, Eliot. Is there something you'd like to talk about?"

"What's her name?" asked Hugh. For several seconds, I could only stare, my gaze alternating between the two brothers. Both twins possessed warm, hazel eyes and medium builds. Hiram rocked an undercut on his head and stubble—a blanket of fuzz that never vanished but never grew into a full beard—on his face. Hugh sported a handlebar mustache and a metalhead mullet, which he usually kept in a man bun.

I told them my tale of adolescent love and loss. Hugh, the less talkative of the two, laid his hand on my shoulder. The anxiety I had built up in recounting the story evaporated away; I could almost see steam rising from the gaps between Hugh's fingers.

"You're a cool guy," said Hiram, "and she's a cool girl, but not every coupling of cool people is necessarily meant to be, you know? Call your parents, and I'll let them know that you're spending the night at the Vots' place."

I made the call, and Hiram pitched the idea of a sleepover to my mom in the same way that a telemarketer would pitch a product. Before Hugh and I could schlep the quiet brother's drums into the percussion closet, Hiram called

after us, declaring that he had closed the sale. He hoisted his bass guitar over his head in triumph and led the way to the parking lot.

From there, I followed the brothers Vot up the road that meanders beside the Quill Pen River until we reached their estate: Inkwell. The gated community contained the main Vot mansion, a few storage sheds, and two smaller houses. The brothers led me toward the latter.

“One of them is for guests,” Hiram explained, “and the other one is ours. Pop let us move into it so that we could have some freedom, but not *too* much.”

We settled into the bachelor pad for the night, and we played video games (mostly racing games and tournament fighters) into the morning. We may not have finished *all* of our homework that night, but the therapy of fellowship was worth it—if only for that one occasion.

A few days before graduation, I received an e-mail from the patriarch himself: Gregory A. Vot.

“Please come visit the main mansion at Inkwell,” read the text box. The brief message was followed by Papa Vot’s cell phone number, and we arranged a meeting for the break of dawn on the morning of the graduation ceremony. (What can I say? I like to cram a ton of time commitments into the same day. Also, I have a difficult time sleeping the night before a major event.) At seven, convenience store coffee in hand, I stepped from my car into the Vots’ driveway. The front door opened for me, and I took my cue to enter.

Lavender walls, ebony siding, and marble tabletops greeted me. I removed my shoes before treading on the gray shag carpet.

“I almost wouldn’t mind being frozen in childhood if I lived here,” I thought aloud to myself.

“That’s the goal,” a weary voice replied. Searching for the speaker, I scanned the mansion’s living room until I spotted a shadow atop the stairs. Without another word, he turned and delved deeper into the upper-level hallway.

A knot formed in my gut, but my feet surged forward one after the other. I climbed the stairs and followed the shadow into his study. Not surprisingly, a collage of newspaper clippings hung on his wall. (Conspiracy theorists always collect newspapers.) Grainy photographs of crop circles dominated the center of the frame. Pictures of Papa Vot manipulating circuitry lined the perimeter of the frame.

As a speculator on the possibility of extraterrestrial life, Vot had drawn more than a few scoffs and eyerolls from the commoners and local government suits alike. As one of a handful of gifted engineers who brought Votsboro into the modern era, however, he carried a begrudging respect from all of them.

Vot's study was located directly under a gable in the roof. Beginning about five inches above my head, the ceiling slanted sharply. Opposite the newspaper collage, a cupboard with windows housed an assortment of books and audiotapes. Then, finally, my eyes landed on the man himself.

The old, world-weary black man sat on the deep sill of the study's only window. The dark, trimmed soul patch from the photographs had since grown into an Amish-style beard of steel wool. Vot wore a pair of khaki slacks, an untucked dress shirt, and no shoes or socks. *He's probably just beginning to prepare for the ceremony*, I figured. At last, the patriarch drew in a deep, labored breath, and he began to speak:

"Thank you for being their friend, Eliot Tsukamoto. I know it's not always easy to be seen with the town freaks."

"It's been worth it, sir," I replied, taking a seat on a nearby futon. "They've been good to me." Vot stared at his feet for a long minute. Then, with a sigh, he broke the silence.

"I don't know you well personally," said the patriarch, "but I respect you too much to withhold the truth from you any longer." Vot lifted his foot to

reveal a glowing, blue tattoo. I recognized on his sole the same pattern from the crop circles. “There’s an electric fence built into the city’s power grid. My colleagues and I designed it to keep the extraterrestrials out.”

“Come again?” I asked.

“I don’t expect you to believe me, but at least hear me out.” I watched Vot’s eyes shift from me to the floor as he weighed his next words. “The fence worked a little too well. We attracted some unwanted attention. Since our otherworldly friends could not breach our defenses, they tried to negotiate with us through a private radio frequency. Eventually. . . I was able to strike up a deal with them.”

“WHAT?!” I cried. I shot to my feet, but the sudden rise, combined with Vot’s revelation, made me light-headed, and I collapsed onto my seat again.

“Hiram and Hugh had just turned eighteen—for the first time—and I. . . realized that I wasn’t ready to let them go. I wasn’t ready to let *any* of my children go!” His breaths turned to heaving gasps. “I altered the frequency of the electric fence by an imperceptible degree, allowing the extraterrestrials to come and go as they pleased. In exchange, their physicians sedated us, and they surgically transformed us into . . . whatever we are now.”

With a trembling voice, I launched a single-question interrogation at the modern Faustus:

“How can you be OK with what you did?”

“I can’t,” answered the old man. “But it needed to be done. If you ever have a family of your own, Eliot, you will know the pain of drifting apart! Most people have either buried me in the past or grown to merely tolerate me. Miriam and the kids are all I have in terms of human connection.”

“You’re not even sure that they’re human anymore,” I corrected.

“THEY’RE THE CLOSEST THING I HAVE!” erupted the patriarch. He took a moment to collect his thoughts. “Sorry, kid,” he said. “The extraterrestrials

never told me their scheme, but their presence in this town is the reason for its so-called . . . ‘paranormal activity.’ Whenever you get the opportunity, I want you and your family to move to Cusp City. Its forcefield has not been compromised. I can’t undo what I’ve done, but I can share the truth with those who are worthy of knowing it. In case we never meet again, Eliot Tsukamoto, just know that you are the best friend that any of them have ever had.”

The rest of the day—including the graduation ceremony—was a blur I saw the Vot family in the audience, sitting toward the back of the auditorium, but none of them stuck around after the cap toss. The next morning, my parents received an ultimatum to leave Votsboro, complete with a check from Gregory A. Vot to cover expenses. Acting on the perceived threat, my parents relocated us to Cusp City.

I have not been back to Votsboro since. Hopefully, something has changed since I left. Maybe a friendlier race of aliens has defeated the extraterrestrials who cursed the town! I don’t know! I just know that the Vot kids are good people at heart, and they deserved a better ending.

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## Author's Note

Reasons to hope are everywhere, but they're almost never obvious. I believe in God, but I also believe that this world is a cursed place. That's why I don't shy away from darker themes; I believe that reasons to hope are like flakes of gold at the bottom of a river: buried beneath dirt, contaminated water, and pieces of whatever riffraff has fallen into the stream, but real and valuable nonetheless.

Think of your life as a video game. (I haven't been a gamer in years, so forgive me if my jargon is a little rusty.) In this game, you have a handful of main objectives. You need to collect resources. You need to find the perfect playstyle for your unique character. You need to assist the characters you care about in physical, mental, and spiritual ways. There is a vocal minority of NPCs determined to convince you that you will never have high enough power levels to complete the next quest in the main storyline, and you need to prove them wrong. Along the way, you will need to gather a team for the battle royale stages.

You *will* use every ability and power-up at your disposal. If you allow yourself to completely lose hope, you will fail one or more of your core objectives because hope is one of your most powered-up tools. At each level, the Game Designer has given you just enough resources to pass. If you find yourself stuck in a tunnel so narrow that only one button on your controller works, and your character can only squirm, that's *something* that you can do! Keep playing, friend. Even if you're in a situation as confusing and terrifying as the town of Votsboro, keep playing.

By His grace,

Matthew M. Waters